

Transcript: Daddy, Papi, Papa or Baba: The Influence of Father's on Young Children's Development Featuring Kyle Pruett, M.D.

Hello and welcome to ZERO TO THREE 's exciting new podcast series for parents: Little Kids, Big Questions, made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation. ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization devoted to the health and development of babies, toddlers and their families.

I'm Annie Pleshette Murphy, a ZERO TO THREE board member, and the host of this series, which will showcase interviews with leading child development experts on the issues most pressing to parents today, based on findings from a recent parent survey ZERO TO THREE conducted again with support from MetLife Foundation.

I am pleased to welcome Dr. Kyle Pruett who will be joining us today to talk about the important and unique role of fathers in the lives of young children. Kyle is clinical professor of child psychiatry at the Yale School of Medicine and is a past president of ZERO TO THREE. He is the author of many books on parenthood, but one that I think is most relevant for our discussion today is a book called Partnership Parenting that he co-wrote with his wife Marsha Kline Pruett. Thank you so much for joining us today Kyle.

A: I'm delighted to be here, Annie. Thank you.

Q: So, we're gonna talk about something that is near and dear to your heart, to your work, to your life, which is the critical role that fathers play in the lives of infants and toddlers. I want to start, Kyle because you told me a story not long ago that I have been thinking about, and, umm, smiling about, which I, uh, would love you to repeat about—I guess you were giving a talk, as you often do, to—to fathers, and a grandfather came up to you afterward, and—have I gotten it right in saying grandfather?

A: You've gotten—you've gotten right. Yes. There was a distinguished-looking gentleman who was, umm, actually standing for most of the presentation, looked like he was going to leave if this turned out to be too boring for him. He came up afterwards, and he said, "I've been waiting to just sort of tell you something. I am a—I am an extremely active grandfather, but I was not an active father, and it's bothered me more and more." Umm, and I said, "Well, how did the change happen?" And he said, "It was my own son's, umm, welcome of me into the kind of nurturing realm that he and his lovely wife have created. And, umm, I was there— umm, not at the labor and delivery, but I was in the hospital, and I came out, umm, and met my—my grandchild in the arms of my son, and he had

been instantly, uh, transformed, uh, by this experience. He just looked different than he ever had. “And I was reminded that I and my wife had made this stupid decision that I wasn’t gonna be involved with them very often until they could really talk, because, you know, I didn’t know what to do until—then until they started asking questions, and then I knew what to do.” And he said, “My heart just aches now as I watch these moments between my son and my grandchild, and I have begun to copy them, and I’m now there holding this child. I’ve learned to—to, umm, uh, give him a bath, I—I’ve learned to swaddle him when he’s upset, I’ve started, umm, to sing to him when I have a minute, and I now know what I was missing and saw in my son’s eyes. Umm, what a waste of time to have waited on the sidelines while these—these children were growing, and I—I—I wish you would just tell everybody whose attention you can get about how important it is to be there from the beginning, because it doesn’t just change the children. I heard you talk about that, Dr. Pruett. I mean, it changes the man, and I’ve watched my son change, and I’ve felt it happen to me, and I’m—you know, I’m an old guy, and it still affected me. So, this is more powerful than anything I would have ever believed, and, uh, uh, I feel lucky that it—it didn’t—uh, you know, it didn’t escape my life completely. I’m a lucky old guy.”

Q: I’m smiling again hearing this story all over again. And I—and I guess one of the things that struck me—there were two things. One is to ask you whether you think that times really have changed, whether the fact that, uh, it was dad who brought his child out to meet grandpa, umm, is something very different, and that’s something that, uh, makes you happy given what you know about how important it is for dads to be involved early. Do you think most dads still feel that they really shouldn’t jump in there, that there’s not much they can do or offer if mom’s breastfeeding, mom’s doing most of the care, that they wait until the child can talk and ask questions? Or is that changing?

A: I think it’s changing, Annie. I—I’ve watched it occur in the 30 years that I’ve been interested in this. I needed a signed letter of permission to be present in the labor and delivery room for the birth of my first child, who’s now 40. Uh, and this was in the same labor and delivery room where I delivered about eight or nine babies as an intern. I mean, it was preposterous. Now it is the expectation that fathers be there. It’s the expectation that they, uh, will either cut the cord, or be supportive of the mother and the baby in some direct way. And that’s been a profound change. I’ve seen it, uh, in a lot of, uh, domains. A child development course that I’ve been teaching for many years, umm, used to have only women in it in—in the mid 1970s, and now it’s about half and half. And the men are there not because they have lost the bet; the men are there

because they have an expectation that they will know something about what they're doing. Men hate to not know what to do. And the expectation of their—their girlfriends, their partners, their potential partners is that they will be co-parenting, umm, with them, and that has been something that certainly was not an expectation when I was growing up.

Q: Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about what is the unique role that dads play in children's lives? I know that's a very, very, big question. What do you say to encourage dads to get right in there from the beginning?

A: Well, most of them are, umm, reluctant to do anything at which they have no skill. And—umm, and for good reasons. I mean, they feel—uh, they feel sort of, uh, ham-handed, uh, when they're trying to bathe or hold the baby or feed them, and so—umm, uh, but that doesn't keep them from—from—trying. And—and one of the things we know in, you know, fathers when they do get involved, they do not mother. But they father. And what that means is, umm, in general fathers are more likely to be physically activating of their children, uh, than mothers, umm, to whom they—they would be compared. Mothers love to hold their children close to the upper chest, the crook of the neck comforting, protecting, holding. Fathers, when they hold their children, are more likely to hold them up against their side supporting their weight on the upturned palm.

Q: Right. The old—the old football hold.

A: Well, yes. And—and—and—or sort of, uh, you know, the mother carries the child through the world protecting the child from the world, and the father carries the child sort of as a hood ornament.

Q: Like facing out?

A: Facing out. And so they're saying, "We're gonna---we're gonna encounter this together." And those are—they're subtle differences. But it is intriguing to watch. Fathers will do a little more roughhousing, for example, with their children than mothers. They'll—often when they do pick them up, it's most likely that they'll pull them to their body immediately. They may roll them over, turn them upside down, and they throw them in the air. They—they—they're gonna play with them. And fathers will tell you, "I like to have my kid's attention," when they're with them spending time with them. Mothers are often sort of saying, "Oh, calm them down. God, enough is enough. You know, who's—you know, no one's had any sleep. We don't need a turned-on kid." Mothers also

tend to work with their children to avoid frustration. You'll hear dads, uh, doing that a little less often in the service of helping their children manage frustration. "I've got to get you ready for the outside world. Nobody's gonna cut your crust off your toast when you go to college, so let's figure out how you're gonna problem solve, and that means you're gonna get a little upset, and I'm gonna hang back a little bit when I know you can solve the problem." Umm, mothers and fathers—they discipline slightly differently. Uh, when the children get older mothers will discipline more in the context of the emotional relationship—you know, "When you disobey me", "You don't listen to me," "You're in trouble with me. Our relationship is sort of out of whack here." The father is more likely to discipline, umm, you know, "Listen to me or you're gonna get in trouble." "I know how to make your life better in the world, and I want you to learn that too." "I'm less involved with how it feels emotionally between us. And they are more likely to use humor—humor, for example, and do a little teasing. So, these are differences. They—I think they're trending social differences. But they're differences that seem to matter to children. Umm—

Q: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about that. A lot of parents will ask me, you know, "He's not doing it my way," you know, and—and, uh, you know, I—I'd love to hear you talk about how it benefits babies to have very different styles of parenting.

A: You've asked two fascinating questions, Annie. We have evidence that—that babies as young as six weeks of age are already responding to paternal versus maternal styles differently. Whenever a mother goes to pick up her baby out of the infant seat—this was work done by Michael Yogman at Boston-- and what he found was when the mother—you know, this was after feeding—goes to pick up the baby, six weeks old, the eyes begin to close, the shoulders relax, heart and respiratory rates, which he was watching, slow and regularize. You know, uh-mom, and the baby begins to settle and calm. And the father, same age, uh, baby—six weeks—goes to pick up the baby, what happens is quite different physiologically in the baby. Their eyes open, the neck tends to extend, the shoulders hunch up, uh, instead of relax, and heart and respiratory rates begin to get a little faster as if they sort of say, "Wow, you know, dad, party time." There—there seems to be some advantage, uh, for the baby to be able to tell the difference between paternal and maternal approaches. And, umm, you'll also see, umm, in the toddler, for example, toddlers will often approach the dad for physical activity. They want to use the father's body as a jungle gym. Mother says, "No—no thanks, you've already had my body. I'd like it back now. Go play with your dad if you want to do nutty stuff like that."

- Q: So, obviously what I'm hearing, uh, is that—that this is really good for babies, that they need both, or that it's good for them to have both if possible; that babies need to both have that sense of, "Ah, here comes Mom. I can relax. She's gonna soothe me." And, "Here comes Dad, he's—we're gonna have a lot of fun, and it's gonna be stimulating." And—umm, but that in fact dads don't have to parent their children like mom, In—in fact, just the opposite; that different styles are both tolerated, and I guess really, uh, needed by babies.
- A: Well, I think that that was the second question that I was avoiding, which I'll now take on, since you brought me back to it.
- Q: Yeah. Who's better? You can just tell me, Kyle.
- A: Parenting is on-the-job training for both mothers and fathers. Often mothers have had more social support. They practice with other people's children, and they get a lot of support for doing this well. They also get a lot of criticism for doing it less well, especially from other mothers, I might add. Umm, but when the mother is gate keeping, what she's doing is saying, "Honey, please do it my way. I've figured out how to do it. It's easier, you know, umm, if when you take the child out make sure you don't take him out too close to his naptime. Make sure you don't feed him too many solids today. Make sure that you've got him dressed in a coordinated outfit. If you take him out, run into people in the neighborhood, I want him X, Y, Z." So, the mother often, without intending, has turned the father sort of into her employee rather than support his relationship with the child.
- A: And so what real co-parenting is—not about 50/50; You have to be led by what the child needs. Umm, children get up in the middle of the night. It's more comforting for them to be comforted by a father when they're breastfeeding, because he doesn't have breast milk on him. She does. And it will drive the baby nuts because they are—they feel like they should feed when they're not hungry, and it gets intense. Other times, you know, the—the—the mother is absolutely the right recipe for the distress the child is in. So that means back-and-forth tag teaming—"I'll cover when you're up," and, "I'll let you sleep when I am on duty," "
- Q: Are there other issues that you think come up for parents let's say in the first year that they often just are kind of blindsided by that they need to be addressing ahead of time?

- A: When you've been sleep deprived now for six months, when you can't even remember why you married this person, and you're used to feeling competent, and then parenting comes along and, my God, you feel as dumb as a post. And so we're not used to feeling that incompetent. So, if you're thinking about having kids, have these conversations, because the work that we have seen about co-parenting tells us that when you have these conversations before the child has come, the toddler years, which, by the way, are the Armageddon of co-parenting—uh, the toddler years will go easier on both of you. You will realize, you know, "This is something we thought we had talked about. I think I remember you're saying X. I'm feeling Y. This is really about our belief system. It's not about what you're doing right and I'm doing wrong, or vice versa. It's about what we believe. Let's go back and have—let's revisit that conversation." And that brings you back into a partnership instead of a competition, that's such a fine distinction when you're exhausted and you're feeling defeated. So, those questions: sleeping, eating, discipline, what do we think about television, what do we think about, uh, Baby Einstein videos, what do we think about, uh, Sponge Bob, what do we think about grandma looking after the kids? What do you think we ought to be doing about our relationship? How are we gonna keep our marriage interesting while we're so consumed by this? These work-balance issues. Those are all really good conversations to be having, because once the baby is there, it's all gonna be about them.
- Q: Right. This is so smart. And it also speaks to, uh, some of the data that came out of this Hart research that we—that Zero To Three conducted with, umm, about 1,600 parents, and a couple of things you just said, Kyle, uh, were reflected in—in some of the findings. For example, dads said that they found issues like sleep and feeding— in particular much more challenging than moms. But tantrums didn't really bother them so much, umm, whereas mothers were much more likely to say that was their number-one, umm, behavior that was the most troublesome for them. What—what do you think is going on there?
- A: There were some interesting what I call gendered findings that you—you know, dads were half as likely to get upset with temper tantrums than moms. And I think moms take temper tantrums far more personally than dads do. And it's not just because moms have to deal with them more often than dads. It's that they feel like they have failed their child if they're gonna be this far out of control. It means they're doing something wrong. It's an indictment of their inadequacy. Dads see the temper tantrums as immature, dumb, stupid behavior, and, "Why would you do that, because you're just gonna embarrass yourself." Umm, dads are less likely to be troubled by kids biting, fighting and hitting than moms. Moms sort of see

that as, umm, you know, antisocial behavior. Dads sort of see it as, umm, a in-artful and immature way to get your problem solved. They can understand why you might want to do it, but use words next time.

Q: Yes. We've talked a lot about the impact that, umm, dads have on children, and the importance of co-parenting. in terms of involving dads, are—are there ways of—of getting them to—umm, to see that this is something that's going to benefit them in ways that I think a lot of dads are not brought up to expect?

A: You know, I—umm, I've given this a lot of thought, Annie, because the—the evidence about, umm, the positive affects of paternal engagement on men's entire lives is—is very persuasive. We—we know that, for example, fathers live longer than men who do not have children. I know—I know it doesn't feel like that when you're doing it. But, the actuarial data says that it does; men have fewer accidents, less suicidal deaths occur when men become fathers, umm, and they tend to change jobs less frequently. So, you know the closer you are to children, the better off you are.

Q: What do you say to parents with the situation where the marriage doesn't make it. Umm, are there ways to get past the—you know, the anger and the hurt you may be feeling towards one another in—in order to keep dad involved?

A: It is a totally doable job. Umm, it isn't easy. It is complicated. It's logistically often a nightmare particularly in the multitasking world that we all inhabit. But when you talk to children who have had a mother and father who continued to make the sacrifices for them, who made the other parent's job, umm, you know, as easy as they could, uh, that really supported each other, did not do the badmouthing, did not do the undermining, did not do the manipulative changes of schedule, etcetera, etcetera, you'll hear from these children, you know, "I—I—I really miss my—my—my parent's marriage, but they parented me well, and I—I respect what they had to do in order to help me feel loved and protected for all those years. I know it wasn't easy." That's a more common story than the opposite.

Q: Right. Right. No. That's—that's great for people to realize.

A: I think what that involves, though, is to sort of have respect for what the other contributes, that it not be, umm, you have to do it my way or it's the

highway, that, umm, when my schedule falls apart I'm gonna turn to you first; not hire a babysitter and see if you'd like some extra time. I'm gonna make sure that you know there's a booster shot due—you know, really treat the other partner as someone whose presence you appreciate in the life of your child. Remember, this is not about you anymore. It's about your child.

Q: So, Kyle, one of the things that Zero To Three has done, and has actually done an amazing job, is their work with military families. And, you know, it's one thing if you're divorced. But if let's say dad has been deployed, or if there's a situation where dad is really having to spend long periods of time away from the kids, is it possible to you know, maintain that connection?

A: The men and women who have found themselves separated who have young children, umm, their devotion to keeping, umm, their—uh, their absent parent alive has just staggered the imagination. These were tools—Skyping, faxing—umm, the kind of opportunity to keep a visual image of the absent parent alive has been extremely supportive to children and to the mothers or the—or the fathers, if they're the one at home. They are a little bewildering to very young children who don't understand the difference between a digital image and the real image, but it's a small price to pay, that bewilderment, in order to feel the support that the mother feels when the father Skypes in, or when he sends you a fax, or whatever he's doing, umm, to sort of say, "Let's hear what Daddy's up to," is so different than, umm, the pre-digital, uh, deployment in where the father simply disappeared. There was no image of him available. And so we are watching reunions that are easier. Re-integrations that are easier. They're not simple, but they are easier, because the child and the mother, the staying-home parent, has felt the liveliness of that image kept, uh, fresh by the digital information. So, the message is, "Daddy may not be here, but we care about him. He's very important to us. You are very important to him. And, umm, let's make him a picture and we'll fax it to him tonight."

Q: So, Kyle, you've talked a lot about what, umm, wonderful things dads bring into children's lives: the way they parent, the—the—the kind of ways they handle disciplinary issues that are very different than moms, umm, what they encourage and bring out in children. And so I have a really nice picture of this wonderful role dads play in children's lives when they're very young. But what do we know about long-term what this means for kids?

A: Well, we're—when we're talking about the impact that fathers have on the lives of their children over time. We're not talking about, umm, men who are only biological parents. We're talking about men who are, umm, committed to the emotional well being of their children. They can be step, they can be grandfathers, they can be, umm, uh, beloved uncles. Umm, what—what matters it seems is that they are engaged in a supportive parenting collaboration with the mother, and, umm, that they carry their children's needs in them as an obligation. And when that happens, we watch children benefit, umm, behaviorally, educationally, and emotionally. Children who have had these kinds of men engaged in their lives, uh, are much less likely to be involved with juvenile justice. They're more likely to be better problem solvers. They're more likely to use far fewer violent problem-solving techniques, such as hitting or yelling or screaming. They are more likely to delay their first sexual contact until late in their adolescence or young adulthood. There's something about having, umm, these partnerships in your life that makes you sort of respect your body, uh, a little bit more, and you're not looking for love in all the wrong places. Educationally you'll see children staying in school longer. Uh, you'll watch children have stronger verbal, uh, performance scores. And that is a bit of a mystery since the joke is that men don't talk, and, umm, we—we don't quite understand the cause-and-effect relationship, but we are aware that the father's vocabulary is a better predictor of verbal competence in young children than the mother's.

Q: Really? So interesting.

A: We see girls, umm, showing more problems-solving abstract mathematical competence through the fourth and fifth grades when they've had engaged fathers in their lives. And those are the educational, umm, benefits.

Q: Yeah. Great. Well, Kyle, this was fantastic. I can't thank you enough. And, umm, I also thank you for your work with fathers and children, and with Zero To Three.

A: Thank you, Annie. I look forward to our next chat.

Q: All right. Thanks a lot.

A: Okay. Bye-bye.

Q: Bye.